Nation

The Presidency/Hugh Sidey

Gulliver's Travails

Washington, as is so often the case, has turned the issue on its head. The capital question of the year, it seems, will be: What did Ronald Reagan do to create "Iranamuck"? Instead, the question should be: What is Reagan capable of doing now? At last count, nine separate and distinct committees, commissions, groups, gangs, panels, conclaves and councils had been set up to investigate one or all of the parts of the affair. That is a formidable force for anybody to face, even Ronald Reagan, he of monumental disdain for the catcalls from the galleries. The President might just decide to hell with it all and sleep late—er, sleep later.

Kidding aside, the fine edge of courage is honed by energy, exhilaration, adventure and the promise of applause. When does a man approaching 76, with various parts of his body needing repair, begin to sag under the burden of his years, to retreat from the prospect of emotional battering?

STAT

Richard Helms, the former CIA director and Ambassador to Iran, who counseled seven Presidents over three decades, noted how, sooner or later, "they all felt like Gulliver, bound down by a thousand regulations and laws and the fear of leaks whenever they tried to do anything quickly and secretly to prevent trouble." Then pretty soon, says Helms, they began to lose heart in a thousand small ways that diminished their leadership.

Helms contends that a President who finally is afraid to risk a Bay of Pigs, a Desert One or an Iranian arms deal will be reluctant to order a naval quarantine around Cuban missiles, recapture the hijacked ship *Mayaguez*, help the British in the Falklands or intercept the *Achille Lauro* terrorists. "In this game," says Helms, "some failure comes with the play. But we'd better not walk off the field."

DENNIS BRACK—BLACK STAR

Helms: "failure comes with the play"

By necessity, men of action in this difficult world must be gamblers of a sort, self-assured right up to the precipice of recklessness. Confabs and conciliations and conferences do not make heroes.

Before he took his abrupt leave as the President's National Security Adviser, Vice Admiral John Poindexter mused, "An activist President cannot be satisfied with the status quo. A President must have a way to develop bolder options." Even David Durenberger, who as head of the Senate Intelligence Committee has had his share of harsh things to say about Reagan's swashbuckling, asks, "How in the world [can] a President make and implement policy in a world in which we're trying to anticipate events, rather than confront them after they have occurred?"

Secrecy is almost always essential, risk inherent. Kennedy turned to the CIA in the Bay of Pigs. Reagan went even further out of sight and used his National Security Council staff. Both reaped a whirlwind when failure exposed their schemes. But the tidy techniques of shared confidences among the various branches of the Government, so favored by professors, are not well suited to the dark alleys of the globe where passions explode before a quorum can be called.

Up until now Ronald Reagan has relished the playing field of great power. The larger tragedy of the Iran arms deal could be that his heart has been wilted a bit, his eyes dimmed. The next time there seems to be an opportunity for swift, bold action to bolster America's cause in the world, the President may think first not of the glory but of the possible penalty, and he will go back to the fire and his memories.